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Guatemala After the Generals

After 16 years of military rule that varied only in the intensity of its brutality and the identity of the general in charge, an elected civilian president was inaugurated in Guatemala last month.

How long Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo will remain president is anyone's guess. Like Argentine President Raul Alfonsin, he must walk a tight-rope between a military establishment that has been the decisive factor in his country's politics since 1954 and the demands for justice by the families of the tens of thousands of civilians killed since 1978 as suspected leftists. He must also contend with a small but dedicated leftist guerrilla movement and pressure for higher wages from teachers and other groups.

The new president himself takes a humorously realistic view of his precarious position. He told reporters recently that if he pushes too hard for prosecution of the military men responsible for the years of slaughter, the army will stage a coup. "If that happens," he said cheerily, "you'll be interviewing me in Miami."

No one questions Cerezo's good intentions. A 43-year-old liberal Christian Democrat, he sincerely hopes he can change life for the 8 million inhabitants of his Tennessee-size country. Most of them are impoverished Indian peasants, descendants of the Mayas who reigned for 1,000 years before the Spaniards came.

If anything, the Guatemalan military men are even more intransigent than their Argentine counterparts—and have not suffered the humiliation of defeat in a foreign war to weaken their hand. The United States bears heavy responsibility for the dominance of the Guatemalan military: their power dates to the CIA-engineered coup that overthrew President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in 1954.

Flagrant human rights abuses have become the trademark of the series of military juntas, as they sought to put down a festering leftist guerrilla movement with a merciless campaign

of scorched earth and political murder.

Estimates of those killed by the army or its underground "death squads" range as high as 100,000 during the past decade. The vast number of victims becomes even more appalling when the pitiful strength of the guerrillas is considered. Diplomatic sources estimate the actual number of armed rebels at somewhere between 1,400 and 1,700.

The explanation for the enormous disparity between the threat and the response is the brutal military policy: starve the guerrillas of support by exterminating anyone and everyone suspected of being sympathetic.

Even when the death squads were curbed, the bloodshed didn't diminish. The death squads operate mainly in the urban areas. When the born-again Christian general, Efraim Rios Montt, took power in March 1982, he suppressed the death squads' depredations. But the massacre of rural Indians suspected of allegiance to the guerrillas increased dramatically. Then, when Rios

Montt was booted out by Gen. Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores in 1983, the rural killings slackened off and the urban death squad murders resumed.

Cerezo has promised to dismantle one police agency widely regarded as knee-deep in the political bloodletting: the notorious DIT, or Technical Investigations Division. This force of several hundred killers reportedly works closely with army intelligence. Together they spy on, kidnap, torture and then kill suspected leftist sympathizers. Many of the victims are human rights activists, students and university professors.

But hanging over the speculation of Cerezo's hopes and intentions is the stolid, immutable threat of the military. Whether spoken or unspoken, the big question is whether the army will tolerate any real change in the system that has given it the ultimate power—let alone allow civilians to bring military men to book for past atrocities.

In one of his last acts before relinquishing office to the new president,

Gen. Mejia Victores decreed a general amnesty "for all persons responsible for . . . or connected with political or common crimes committed between March 23, 1982, and Jan. 14, 1986." The 1982 date was when Rios Montt seized power and began the harsh counterinsurgency campaign in the countryside.

The White House would like to see Cerezo prevail, and has offered to step up the modest flow of military and economic aid to Guatemala. The amount of economic aid being discussed is at least \$25 million and possibly twice that amount.

Cerezo has told the administration to forget about military aid for the moment; to pacify the army for this withholding of goodies, he has promised there will be no Argentine-style inquisition into the military's past excesses. This will make the victims' families unhappy—but it may be enough to keep Cerezo in office.

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